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Chaunticlere: Paintings from the 1980s

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THESE PAINTINGS WERE MADE IN ENGLAND during a decade marked by intense political polarisation, social upheaval and no little violence. The eighties audience would have fully recognised the energy in the work as reflecting the contemporary zeitgeist with all its dissent and anarchy. But looking at them again 40-odd years later, it's possible to rescue them from their historical and geographical moment and see them afresh—and, they look great. It is as if setting aside their political relevance has made their richness and complexity more visible, revealing two aspects, the “performative” and the “immersive,” which may reconnect them to current critical interests.

Clearly the performative aspect comes via the influence of American Action Painting (rather than abstract expressionism). Meaning is derived from the paint and the painter ‘doing’ rather than ‘describing’ something. The basic action is a hybrid of drawing and writing, which is unevenly spread, layered and intermingled across the canvas. The full range of pigment, from impasto to highly diluted glazes reminiscent of watercolour, is deployed combined with different methods of landing the paint onto the support, which can be floor or wall-based. The gestural scope varies from the large brush daubs—that look like scrawled slogans—to delicate, lacy (but tortured) tendrils and cilia applied with old hog hairs or tube ends.

While the material performance of the pigment is maximised by the painter's manipulative skills, his palette is usually restricted, with black as the dominant feature. There are areas of polychrome in *Reluctance: The State Peach* (1984) and *James Joyce's Smile* (1984), as well as the complementaries in *Chaunticlere* (1989), but usually colour relationships are based on tonal and warm/cool contrasts. But, the performative force of the black overrides its place in the chromatic economy, operating as an opening gambit, making the first large-scale move on an empty canvas with a gesture that has to be pacified and accommodated.

There are several reasons to claim these paintings offer an immersive experience. Their scale is life-size, inviting the viewer to become absorbed in close-in scrutiny of the passages of intense drawing activity, losing sight, at some point, of the edges of the pictorial field. This sense of a borderless subjectivity, the ‘oceanic’ sensation, is supported by the fluidity of the spatial medium in which the forms are almost digested. The overall liquidity is underlined by the prevalent use of very dilute paint which, following gravity, drips downwards to create the vertical curtaining effect through which the linear elements are threaded.

The liquefaction of the pictorial field, which I am associating with the immersive, seems to shut out ambient light sources, trapping what illumination there is inside the pigment. In *Working River* (1985), the white hieroglyphic structure over the blue looks like an example of bioluminescence, an effect also found in *Midwinter* (1984-85), *The First Kipper Belch* (1986) and the highly aquatic *Diving for Pearls* (1986). When red or orange are drawn over black, the colours glow with a similar luminescence as if created from within.

The combination of the performative and immersive is an interpretation, but it may prompt us to look at these impressive and serious paintings not as historical documents from the archive, but with a new interest, in the present tense, accompanied by the elements of surprise and discovery.

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